The Political Economy of Synthetic Organisms and Posthuman Subjectivity in *Borne*

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Abstract - **This article examines artificial life and posthuman identity in *Borne* by Jeff VanderMeer, situating the novel within contemporary debates on biotechnology, ecological collapse, and the limits of human exceptionalism. Set in a devastated city shaped by corporate bioengineering, the narrative foregrounds the emergence of a sentient, artificially created being whose development challenges conventional definitions of personhood. The article argues that the novel reimagines artificial creation not as an expression of technological domination or apocalyptic threat, but as a site where relational ethics and care redefine subjectivity. Rather than framing the artificial being as monstrous or purely instrumental, the text presents identity as fluid, interdependent, and shaped through language, recognition, and responsibility. Methodologically, the study draws on posthuman theory and eco-critical perspectives, supported by close textual analysis of key narrative moments that trace the creature's cognitive and ethical evolution. By emphasizing relationality over control, the novel contributes to science fiction studies by expanding discussions of artificial life beyond dystopian cautionary tales, proposing instead an ethics of coexistence that responds to contemporary anxieties surrounding biotechnology and environmental crisis.**

Keywords - **Posthuman Identity; Artificial Life; Relational Ethics; Eco-criticism; Biotechnology**

The rising use of biotechnology and posthuman language in contemporary science fiction reflects societal concerns about artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, and the breakdown of human exceptionalism. Jeff VanderMeer's *Borne* provides a unique examination of manufactured life in a society influenced by corporate technoscience and ecological collapse inside this literary universe. The novel places bioengineering in a destroyed environment, where the ruins of scientific ambition linger as unstable and frequently lethal life-forms, rather than portraying technological innovation as triumphant progress. In doing so, it contributes to larger posthuman discussions that challenge established notions of subjectivity, agency, and the distinctions between the human and non-human.

The narrative unfolds in a devastated city dominated by the remains of a powerful biotech corporation whose experiments have reshaped the urban ecosystem.

Among its creations is a colossal, mutated bear that terrorizes the city, symbolizing the catastrophic consequences of instrumental scientific logic. Against this backdrop, the discovery of a small, sentient organism later named as 'Borne' introduces a different possibility for artificial existence. As Borne develops language, curiosity and emotional attachment, the text shifts attention from spectacle and destruction to intimacy and relational formation. The ruined city thus becomes not only a site of technological failure but also a space where new forms of identity emerge.

The ethical aspects of relationality in the creation of posthuman subjects have received less attention than the dystopian control, dehumanization, or technological monstrosity that are frequently highlighted in studies on artificial creatures in science fiction. This article makes the case that Borne reframes artificial creation through an ethics of care, arguing that identity is not determined by biological origin or technological design but rather by recognition, accountability, and interdependence. The novel offers a nuanced reflection on care, relational identity, and accountability in a biotechnologically transformed world by reorienting the discussion from fear of artificial life to the moral obligations inherent in coexistence.

The conceptual foundation of posthumanism challenges the centrality of the autonomous, rational human subject that has dominated Western thought. Posthuman identity is understood as fluid, relational and decentered formed through networks of technological, biological and ecological interdependence rather than fixed essence. In *Borne* by Jeff VanderMeer, identity emerges precisely within such instability. The sentient organism Borne resists categorical classification: neither human, animal, nor machine, it occupies a liminal space that unsettles anthropocentric hierarchies. Its evolving consciousness foregrounds posthuman subjectivity as process rather than essence, demonstrating how being is constituted through interaction, adaptation, and transformation in a biotechnologically altered environment.

Posthuman theorists such as Rosi Braidotti conceptualize the subject as nomadic and dynamic, while Donna Haraway emphasizes hybridity and interspecies entanglement and N. Katherine Hayles underscores the embodied and material dimensions of posthuman existence. These frameworks illuminate the relational formation of Borne's identity. The creature's development through language acquisition, curiosity and emotional attachment echoes Haraway's insistence that subjectivity is co-constructed through companionship and care. Similarly, Hayles' emphasis on embodiment is reflected in Borne's mutable physicality, which refuses stable boundaries. Rather than presenting artificial life as disembodied intelligence or purely mechanical logic, the novel situates it within material vulnerability and ecological entanglement, aligning with posthuman theories that dismantle rigid separations between organic and technological life.

The novel also emphasizes biopolitics, which is the control and manipulation of life itself. Drawing on Michel Foucault's notion of power exercised through the management of biological existence, the corporate entity in the narrative exemplifies technoscientific sovereignty. The Company's experiments produce organisms as commodities and weapons, reducing life to programmable matter. This dynamic reflects contemporary concerns about corporate control over genetic engineering and biotechnology, where life becomes subject to market logic. In this context, artificial beings are not granted subjectivity but instrumentalized as tools of domination, revealing how biopolitical structures determine which forms of life are valued and are disposable.

The ethical problem of artificial creation therefore arises not merely from technological capability but from the conditions under which life is produced and governed. Unlike the corporation's detached experimentation, Rachel's relationship with Borne introduces an alternative ethical framework stranded in recognition and responsibility. The novel suggests that artificial beings become "monstrous" not because of their constructed origins, but because of the absence of relational accountability in their creation. By integrating posthuman theory with biopolitical critique, *Borne* reframes artificial life as an ethical question of care and coexistence, challenging narratives that equate technological innovation solely with threat or control.

In the novel, the Company functions as a residual yet pervasive symbol of technocratic power. Although the corporation has collapsed, its authority persists through the altered landscape and the bioengineered organisms it has unleashed.

The ruined city becomes a living archive of corporate ambition, where laboratories, debris, and unstable life-forms testify to a regime that sought mastery over biology itself. The Company's logic is not grounded in ecological balance or ethical foresight but in experimentation, profit and control. Its absence is therefore not a disappearance of power but a diffusion of its consequences across the environment, suggesting that technocratic authority continues to govern life even after institutional collapse.

Within this framework, artificial organisms are treated as commodities and weapons rather than as beings with intrinsic value. Life is engineered for strategic advantage, efficiency or spectacle, reflecting a system in which biological matter is reducible to product. The Company's experiments produce creatures designed for surveillance, combat and manipulation, collapsing the distinction between organic life and industrial manufacture. Such instrumentalization mirrors biopolitical structures in which existence itself becomes programmable and disposable. In this context, artificial life is stripped of relational meaning; it is produced to serve function rather than to participate in a network of ethical recognition.

Mord, the gigantic flying bear that dominates the skyline, stands as the most visible embodiment of creation without responsibility. Once a living creature, Mord has been transformed into a monstrous force by corporate intervention, its size and aggression amplified beyond natural limits. The bear's destructive presence symbolizes the outcome of technological creation detached from accountability and care. Mord does not merely threaten individual survival; it destabilizes the ecological fabric of the city, demonstrating how instrumental science produces not progress but devastation. Through this figure, the novel argues that monstrosity arises not from artificial life itself, but from systems that sever creation from relational ethics, resulting in ecological and moral catastrophe.

The emergence of posthuman subjectivity is closely tied to language acquisition and self-awareness. When Rachel first encounters Borne, it appears as an enigmatic organism, neither fully animal nor machine. Yet as it begins to speak and ask questions, its consciousness becomes undeniable. Borne's repeated inquiry "What am I?" signals not mere curiosity but an ontological crisis that lies at the centre of the novel. Language becomes the medium through which Borne negotiates its existence, transforming from an object of discovery into a self-reflective subject. At one point, Borne asserts, "I am Borne," a declaration that marks the transition from nameless experiment to self-naming entity. Through speech, memory, and emotional attachment, Borne demonstrates that subjectivity is not biologically predetermined but relationally constituted.

Equally significant is Borne's fluid embodiment, which resists fixed categorization. Its mutable body alters in size, texture, and shape, unsettling stable distinctions between human, animal, and technological life. Rachel witnesses these transformations with a mixture of fascination and unease, gradually realizing that Borne cannot be confined within established biological or conceptual boundaries. This instability directly challenges anthropocentric assumptions about what qualifies as a "person," since Borne's identity does not rest on species membership or organic origin. Instead, its existence occupies a liminal space that unsettles binary frameworks and rigid taxonomies. Rather than reinforcing a strict division between human and non-human, the narrative presents identity as an ongoing process of becoming adaptive, relational, and contingent. Through Borne's evolving consciousness and protean physicality, the novel enacts posthuman subjectivity as a dynamic negotiation of selfhood that exceeds conventional limits of species, material form and origin.

Rachel's act of naming Borne marks a decisive ethical turning point. Naming becomes more than a practical gesture; it is an act of recognition that acknowledges the creature as a being worthy of attention and response. Through this gesture, Borne shifts from anonymous biotech artifact to relational presence. Rachel's willingness to speak to Borne, teach it language, and respond to its questions establishes care as the foundation of subject formation. Rather than deriving identity from origin, design, or function, the novel presents personhood as emerging through interaction, communication, and responsibility. Borne becomes a subject not because it was engineered with intelligence, but because it is recognized and engaged as a participant in a shared world.

This ethic of care stands in stark contrast to the Company's logic of control and instrumentalization. Corporate bioengineering produces life as commodity and weapon, severing creation from accountability. Rachel's relational approach, however, resists domination; it is grounded in vulnerability, mutual dependence, and emotional investment. Her attachment to Borne demonstrates that ethical bonds are not determined by biology but by sustained acts of attention and responsibility. In this sense, the novel argues that identity is constructed through interdependence rather than genetic inheritance or technological design. By juxtaposing corporate detachment with maternal relationality, the narrative reframes artificial life as a site of ethical possibility, suggesting that coexistence and care, rather than mastery, define what it means to become a subject.

In conclusion, *Borne* by Jeff VanderMeer challenges the conventional assumption that artificial life is inherently monstrous or apocalyptic. Through the contrast between corporate bioengineering and Rachel's relational care, the novel demonstrates that monstrosity arises not from technological creation itself but from systems of control that instrumentalize life without accountability. Borne's development into a self-aware, emotionally responsive being illustrates that artificial entities can participate in ethical relationships when recognized as subjects rather than tools. The narrative therefore relocates the source of danger from the existence of artificial life to the structures of power that govern and exploit it.

By foregrounding relational identity and interdependence, the novel makes a significant contribution to posthuman ethics, proposing care and responsibility as central to the formation of subjectivity. It expands science fiction discourse beyond dystopian warnings about technological excess, offering instead a nuanced meditation on coexistence in a biotechnologically altered world. In doing so, the text speaks directly to contemporary debates surrounding biotechnology and artificial intelligence, where concerns about autonomy, agency, and moral accountability remain urgent. The novel ultimately suggests that the ethical future of artificial creation depends not on limiting innovation alone, but on cultivating frameworks of relational responsibility that acknowledge the shared vulnerability of human and non-human life.

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